

Reflections of two departing biologists

by Andy De Volder and Stephanie Rickabaugh

The time has suddenly arrived for us to bid farewell to the Kenai Peninsula, our home for the last ten years. Both of us have accepted positions with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Sacramento, California. Yes, that's right, California. 'NorCal' or 'Cali' as some locals call it, was not a first choice for us, but the job opportunity was just too good to pass up. In the federal service it is often necessary to go where opportunity knocks, if one wants to advance professionally. We are excited about seeing new country and new jobs, but we would like to reflect a bit on our time in Alaska and especially the Kenai Peninsula.

Back in the mid-1990s when we first arrived on the Kenai, most of the trees were still green, just like we were. We came from different states in the eastern U.S., and living in the wide-open expanses of Alaska was a dream that we independently shared. The only things we knew about Alaska were the stories we read and images we saw in magazines and in the 'Milepost.' Initially, like many people we know, we came to the Kenai Peninsula for summer seasonal jobs. I worked as a technician with Ed Berg researching the history of fire and beetle outbreaks in white and Lutz spruce forests on the refuge. Stephanie began as a Student Conservation Association (SCA) volunteer on the backcountry trail crew. She had the enviable job of being paid to canoe and hike refuge trails and stand in awe of some of the most beautiful landscapes on the Kenai Peninsula (and in Alaska) for an entire summer.

Stephanie's ambitions were in the wildlife field, and in 1996 she began working for now retired refuge biologist Ted Bailey as a wildlife technician. In the fall of that same year, after 3 seasons as a technician, I decided to return to school to pursue a master's degree. Stephanie stayed on the Peninsula and began working for ADF&G at the Moose Research Center (MRC) in the winters and the refuge in the summers. Stephanie was doing active field research in support of the refuge's lynx and hare studies; at the moose pens she basically oversaw the operation in the winters. She will always cherish the memories of long days (and some nights) spent locating and capturing lynx. I returned to the Peninsula during the summers of 1997 and 1998 to collect data for my fire history research and spent

the winters in Arizona (like many Peninsula snowbirds do).

In the meanwhile the spruce bark beetle outbreak was peaking. Our perceptions of the Kenai Peninsula, and our remembrances of our time here certainly include the beetle outbreak, but there is more to our story, such as the 296-pound halibut that Stephanie caught in 1997, or my ten halibut trips where I never landed a fish over 39 pounds. We spent summers hiking, berry picking and exploring the Kenai Peninsula from Seldovia to Portage. Nor can Stephanie forget the hours spent training moose at the MRC. We also traveled a bit around the state: up the haul road, New Year's in Chena Hot Springs when it was -59°F, and a week on Kodiak Island in August with sunshine and no rain.

In 2000 Stephanie was converted from a temporary seasonal refuge employee to a permanent seasonal employee, which meant an end to the hard (yet rewarding) winters at the MRC. I returned to the Peninsula in May 1999 and worked for the refuge fire crew for the summer. I jumped ship in September and began working for the Spruce Bark Beetle Office, Kenai Peninsula Borough where I set up the GIS (Geographic Information System) in the mapping shop, and helped to map over one half of the western Peninsula's vegetation types. The maps I produced were used in debates on the floor of Congress.

During our summers we both have fond memories of working on prescribed burns and wildland fire assignments on the Peninsula. In 2001, I worked on the Kenai Lake fire as a GIS specialist near Crown Point and one week later Stephanie was assigned to the Mystery Hills fire as the bear safety specialist. Combined, we have seen more of the refuge than many of the permanent staff members on the refuge today, including a large portion of the Tustumena benchlands, the entire canoe system, Chickaloon flats, and some remote areas in the mountains.

We truly believe that the Kenai Peninsula is one of the most special places in Alaska. As we reflect on our time here it is difficult to imagine living elsewhere. Here we have salt water, forested lowlands, mountains, alpine areas, glaciers and an abundance of

freshwater lakes. All of which are very accessible, and for the most part unspoiled. What a wonderful place!

Following the path where opportunity knocks, I worked briefly for the U.S. Forest Service in Seward, and then was able to get a permanent position as the GIS specialist at the Kenai refuge. There were however no such opportunities at the Refuge for Stephanie to move up the professional ladder. When a permanent biologist position opened in Sacramento, we decided to go for it. As luck would have it, I also found a job in the same Fish and Wildlife Service office in Sacramento.

No doubt in a few months as we sit in traffic and

complain about the heat, we will reminisce fondly about our years on the Kenai Peninsula. Its unspoiled beauty, unrivaled majesty, limitless opportunities for adventure and small town feel will be what we miss the most. Thanks to everyone who has helped us over the years and please keep in touch.

Andrew De Volder and Stephanie Rickabaugh both currently work in the Biology Program at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and will be relocating to Sacramento, California in early May. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.